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## Reports show few local economic benefits from 2008 fires

BY AMY GITTELSON  
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A study by the University of Oregon on the 2008 wildfires in Trinity County chips away at the notion of an economic silver lining around the fire siege.

Yes, the U.S. Forest Service spent millions on suppression efforts on the fires that burned approximately 250,000 acres in Trinity County. But only a small fraction of the money went into Trinity County's economy, the university's Institute for a Sustainable Environment found.

"Maybe a little surprising to us, while Trinity County did have a significant amount of money flow in from the fire suppression,

it was a pretty small percentage of the total," said Cassandra Moseley, director of the institute's Ecosystem Workforce Program.

The program recently released two working papers — one on fire suppression costs and impacts of the fires and the other on community experiences related to the fires. The researchers conducted interviews and examined credit card transactions and federal databases.

The papers are part of a larger study of economic impacts of large wildfires across the American West. Funding for the study is through the federal Joint Fire Sciences Program.

The researchers reported that about 5 percent of the \$155 mil-

### On the Web

"The Lost Summer: Community Experiences of Large Wildfires in Trinity County, California," and "Fire Suppression Costs and Impacts of the 2008 Wildfires in Trinity County, California," are available at <http://ewp.uoregon.edu/largefires/context>

lion spent by the Forest Service on suppression of the Trinity fires went to contractors, businesses and federal employees in Trinity County for fire suppression, goods and services.

"Not very much," Moseley said. There has been a shift in the

way federal agencies suppress fires to a more regional approach, she said.

"It's really an open question whether local people benefit," Moseley said. "In the old days the guy logging stopped and worked on the fire."

"Interviewees noted that the National Fire Plan (2000) and subsequent fire suppression contracting policy changes had reduced their access to these opportunities," the researchers noted. "These policies nationalized suppression contracting and created new requirements for local contractors who wanted to be available to fight large fires in their regions. Two forestry contractors in Trinity County lost

their federal suppression contracts in 2006."

A comparison of third quarter wages and jobs in Trinity County for 2007 and 2008 showed a 17 percent increase in wages of federal employees in third quarter 2008 (the fire period) while the number of federal jobs was stable. Private-sector employment in natural resources dropped 23 percent over that same period of time, and wages in that category dropped 20 percent. Employment in trade sectors dropped 6 percent and wages in those sectors increased by 2 percent. Employment in the leisure and hospitality sectors dropped 2 percent,

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and wages dropped 14 percent.

Third quarter the following year, 2009, federal wages and jobs plunged well below the 2007 level. Jobs and wages in other sectors have also declined although not as dramatically.

The researchers note that further investigation is needed to identify whether those changes might be expected given larger regional, state and national economic trends.

From the Watershed Research and Training Center in Hayfork, Executive Director Nick Goulette said the papers from the University of Oregon are useful from a national policy perspective.

The research does show that local Forest Service employees get a lot of hazard pay and overtime while working fires, he said.

However, "there's sort of a longstanding myth that large wildfires in general are good for communities because local loggers get work," Goulette said, adding that in terms of local and ecological impact, "an upfront investment in forest stewardship work is better than the millions in fire suppression."

Many of those interviewed expressed anger over how the fires were handled — particularly the backfires set to private land.

The interviews bring out one positive impact of the community outrage over fire management, Goulette said. There are now local area advisers — many of them retired Cal Fire and Forest Service employees — designated to provide fire teams with local level input in the event of another large fire.

Moseley said there may also be local level opportunities to build contracting and business capacity for when large wildfires do come.

She noted, "It's not like it's going to be the last fire that happens in Trinity County."